

The Success of Magazine Media

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

By

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April 2016

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2016

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Abstract

Magazines have been a part of American consumption for hundreds of years. Less people have picked up print publications as technology has developed. Despite this, there is still a place for magazines and longform writing. Magazines have declined less in readership than newspapers, and are finding success both in print and in digital formats. I interviewed representatives at different magazines to determine how publications measure success and how that informs a student publication.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor Brad King for supporting me through this project and through my time at Ball State. He has inspired my passion for longform writing and this project was only a small portion of what he has provided me during my college career.

Abstract

Magazines have been a part of American consumption for hundreds of years. Fewer people have picked up print publications as technology has developed. Despite this, there is still a place for magazines and longform writing. Magazines have declined less in readership than newspapers, and are finding success both in print and in digital formats. I interviewed representatives at different magazines to determine how publications measure success and how that informs a student publication.

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I. Introduction

The narrative that magazines are getting fewer advertisers, dropping circulations, and cutting pages is incomplete. The total audience for magazine media increased by 9.8 percent in the first half of 2015. During the same period, audience on the web increased 67.4 percent. Over the past few years, many magazine brands have been forced to adapt to a digital format. Many still succeed on their print platforms while adding to their web brand. Research shows readers are turning to mobile devices for their reading in higher numbers. These devices help mirror the feeling of holding a magazine, compared to computers and laptops. In 2012, the president of publishing at National Geographic Society said that digital editions were the fastest growing piece of their business. Pew Research reported that the majority of single copy and subscription sales come from print, but some magazines do better than others digitally. Essentially, some magazines are doing better in print while others see more success online or in digital issues. Magazines have also experienced a loss in advertising spending—Magazine Publishers had a 5 percent loss in advertising revenue in 2014 compared to a 3 percent increase the year before, according to Kantar Media.

One example is Time magazine. The overall print circulation dropped 21 percent from 4.1 million copies in 2003 to 3.3 million copies in 2013, according to the Alliance for Audited Media. From 2002 to 2012, Time's ad pages declined 49 percent. Pew Research reports that Ad pages are considered a better indicator of financial success of a magazine than ad dollars. The 2015 State of the News Media report stated that at the beginning of 2015, 39 of the top 50 digital news websites had more traffic to their sites from mobile devices than from computers.

Despite the fact that most people are reading on their phones and tablets, longform writing still has importance. Over the past decade, there have been smaller declines in the percentages of Americans reading a magazine (six points) or print book (four points) than a newspaper. Newspapers have dropped 18 points. A report by McKinsey & Company found that every form of media is expected to rise in consumer spending over the next year, except for magazines. One thing that makes magazines different from newspapers is that many magazines have a niche focus. And while fewer new magazines were launched in 2015, fewer also collapsed.

Several web only sources of news have started over the past few years. Vice News began in March 2014 and has 1.1 million subscribers and 175 million video views. Vox.com started in April 2014 and is valued at \$380 million. It is also important to understand the different types of magazines. There are entertainment and celebrity magazines, national magazines, regional magazines, and niche magazines that cover topics like women, home and garden, food, or sports.

Magazines are changing and evolving as the narrative surrounding them evolves. To understand the magazine industry today, I will attempt to get to the heart of the success of different magazines. I will reach out directly to leaders at top magazines to ask them the question: What has led to the success of top print magazines? The aim of this research will be to get a clearer idea of how a magazine makes money and gains readership. This will add to the overall conversation and understanding of the media industry and success of magazines today. Although it can be hard to quantify success, I will determine the best ways to measure this.

II. Methodology

To find out what magazines are successful and how a brand measures success, it is important to look at the wide variety of magazines that exist. Putting a number on the success of

a magazine can be difficult, so I looked at two categories: total revenue and circulation numbers. This puts into perspective the success of a magazine in terms of money and readers, although there are many different ways to categorize magazines. I looked at the top five magazines in these categories and five magazines ranked lower.

By looking at successful and less successful magazines in terms of circulation and readership, I am able to clearly establish which magazines to look into more clearly. The American Society of Magazine Editors categorizes magazines by type when selecting publications for the National Magazine Awards. These categories are general interest, service and lifestyle, style and design, active interest, and literature, science and politics. It is important to consider magazines that fall into these different categories. For example, while *Wired* ranked lower in terms of circulation and revenue, it was one of the only magazines from these findings nominated for the National Magazine Awards 2015 as a general interest magazine.

Additionally, the majority of single copy and subscription sales come from print, but some magazines do better than others digitally, according to a report by Pew Research. For example, 30 percent of *Rolling Stone*'s newsstand sales are in digital format and seven out of ten of *New York Magazine*'s sales come digitally. Pew reported that *The New Yorker* has the most digital subscribers at 80,000, followed by *Wired* at 75,000. This makes the interviews following these findings important. Some magazines continue to succeed based on their print magazine while others prosper digitally.

Below are the top five magazines based on revenue. Total revenue is calculated by adding circulation from subscription sales and single copy sales to advertising money.

Magazine Name	Total Revenue (subscription + single copy + advertising)
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1. People	\$751M
2. Sports Illustrated	\$430M
3. Us Weekly	\$374M
4. Better Homes and Gardens	\$362M
5. Time	\$261M

Below are lowest-ranked magazines (71-75) from the top 75.

Magazine Name	Total Revenue (subscription + single copy + advertising)
71. People StyleWatch	\$44M
72. Wired	\$44M
73. W	\$43M
74. Runner's World	\$43M
75. Teen Vogue	\$42M

Descriptions of the top five magazines based on revenue:

People

People publishes a weekly magazine about celebrity and human interest stories, and publishes content online as well. On the web page, stories are uploaded a couple of times an hour. The

categories for stories on the homepage are news, video, photos, style, most beautiful, royals, premium, and people shop.

Sports Illustrated

Sports Illustrated is a weekly magazine focused on sports. One thing that distinguishes it from other sports magazines is the in-depth articles. The website focuses more on scores and quick sports updates but also includes longer stories as well. The categories on the homepage are NFL, MMQB, NCAAB, Campus, NBA, MLB, NCAAF, NHL, Soccer, and Golf.

Us Weekly

Us Weekly is a weekly celebrity and entertainment magazine. The website includes features from the magazine, quizzes, polls, videos, games, event photos, and a celebrity blog.

Better Homes and Gardens

Better Homes and Gardens is produced 12 times a year and focuses on topics like home, cooking, crafts, gardening, and entertaining. The website categories are Recipes, Decorating, Home Improvement, Gardening, Holidays, Shop, Videos, Entertaining, Beauty, Pets, Magazine, and Vacations.

Time

Time is a weekly news magazine covering national and international news. The website categories include Money, Business, Sports, Newsfeed, Science, Politics, U.S., Ideas, and History.

Below are the top five magazines based on overall circulation. For the purposes of this research, magazines that aren't published by top publishers aren't included. *AARP The Magazine*, *AARP Bulletin*, *Costco Connection*, and *Game Informer* are not included.

Magazine Name	Circulation
1. Better Homes and Gardens	7,615,581
2. Reader's Digest	4,536,912
3. Good Housekeeping	4,348,641
4. Family Circle	4,092,525
5. National Geographic	4,029,881

Below are the bottom five magazines based on overall circulation from the list of the top 100.

• Magazine Name	Circulation
96. Traditional Home	864,505
97. Wired	858,818
98. Fortune	857,431
99. Ser Padres (Parent)	857,354

100. People StyleWatch	830,465
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Based on these numbers, there are several questions I must ask to determine what makes magazines successful. I will attempt to conduct basic interviews with individuals at the above publications. Through this process, I will conduct semi-structured interviews with each magazine to determine levels of engagement and success. I will ask a representative at the magazines the following questions:

- How are you merging print and online?
- How do you measure and compare the engagement online with the engagement in print?
- During this digital transition, what has been the most successful and least successful change?
- As you think about the change in your business and what it has done, what has made you successful?

My findings are the answers to these questions, and based on responses, I can better understand the success of these magazines. I will also speak with the Association of College Media to understand how this informs the college magazine.

III. Findings

After reaching out to several magazine, I received responses from both a regional and niche national magazine. One magazine representative I spoke to worked at *Traditional Home*. This magazine, like many, began as a print magazine only. *Traditional Home* has a very specific audience and centers its content around design and living well. Below are responses from Michael Diver, the managing editor at *Traditional Home*:

How are you merging print and online?

“The first thing to understand about Traditional Home is we do not have a large digital budget, so by far the majority of our online content or presence has been repurposed from material we produced for the magazine. As is true for most print publications, our print edition existed for some time before we ever created a website, and subject matter and point of view and voice that Traditional Home magazine created and nurtured are what we try to translate to our online presence. That said, the digital world has its own sensibility and we recognize that online it is worthwhile to be less formal, less wordy, possibly a bit livelier. Where the two certainly converge is our reliance on images. Both our magazine and our online efforts largely succeed or fail based on the beauty of our images and the interest our readers/users take in them. (Incidentally, I include our social media platforms—Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter—in my thoughts regarding online.) At traditionalhome.com, a fair amount of the content is drawn directly from the magazine. You will see stories from the magazine repurposed directly for the website. In addition to that, we will think of the kinds of subjects users might search for online and pull from many different print and online stories to create presentations such as Design Ideas for White Kitchens, Colorful Living Rooms, Gray and White Bedrooms, and so on.”

How do you measure and compare the engagement online with the engagement in print?

“It can be difficult to measure print engagement. I suppose we could cite subscription renewal rates (ours are high) and correspondence from readers, which is not profuse. One thing we have noticed is how often we hear from retailers and manufacturers whose products have been featured in the magazine—our readers are fairly affluent for a magazine audience, and they are intensely interested in decorating and design. They are, in short, shoppers. Online, we have the usual metrics—unique visitors, page views, what pages and stories are most popular, and more

and more, time spent on the site. We also create downloadable material and we can track the number of downloads each receives. We have various ways of tracking social media engagement. We can tell how often people click on links we place on FB and Twitter (we do use social media to direct people to our website), and of course we can track sharing, likes, pins, those sorts of things.”

During this digital transition, what has been the most successful and least successful change?

“This is somewhat difficult for me to answer. I would not say we have been particularly successful in our digital transition. We would very much like to increase—greatly—the number of people visiting our website and engaging with it. I guess one of our most successful strategies has been to offer sweepstakes of substantial value, which does work but a) feels a little grubby; and b) is not the best way to find and maintain an audience truly interested in what you do. They don’t stick around long, in other words. Least successful is probably our video efforts. The low budget I cited certainly plays a factor in that, but it is easy to recognize how weak our video offerings are.”

As you think about the change in your business and what it has done, what has made you successful?

“I’ll be frank—I’m not prepared to say we’ve been successful.”.

I also interviewed Jared Hay, the digital media manager at Indianapolis Monthly. Indianapolis is a regional magazine and is a member of the City and Regional Magazine Association. Below is my interview with Jared Hay:

How are you merging print and online?

“At Indianapolis Monthly almost 100 percent of our print content makes it online. We try to make it as digitally native as possible, whether it is through multimedia presentations, touch images, or simple print transfers. We also run about 10 to 20 unique pieces of digital content outside of the print edition every month. A good chunk of this is dining and drinks, as we know this is what our audience devours. I think we need more online content, but of course I’m the digital manager.”

How do you measure and compare the engagement online with the engagement in print?

“I can only speak to measuring the engagement online. Not everything we do is intended for online, so I know some of it will fall flat. But, I still want to try and tell the best story online. I’m always looking to grow and engage our online audience with new content, so I measure what has worked well in the past and what has worked well for other publications. I use Facebook analytics to tell me what content is doing well. I use Google Analytics every single day to monitor our site and to give me clues as to what people want to be reading and when. For example, a lot of our dining content does well around 9-10 am when people are searching for lunch ideas, and then again from 2-4 when people are thinking about making dinner reservations.”

During this digital transition, what has been the most successful and least successful change?

“The most successful has been getting to know our audience and what resonates with them. We are able to analyze what they are reading, how long they are there, where they are coming from. From there, we can create more content we think they will like. The least successful change has been making an efficient digital workflow.”

As you think about the change in your business and what it has done, what has made you successful?

“We have a highly engaged audience. I think nurturing that audience, whether they are on print or digital has been key to our success.”

These findings are important because they translate to the future success of magazines and relate to the success of student magazines.

IV. Discussion

The results from professional magazines inform college publications. To find out how this impacts student publications outside of Ball State, I spoke to the executive director for College Media Association. She directed me to other professionals and students, who I reached out to for their own input. This connects the major ideas from professional publications with the success of student publications.

Below are answers from Alexa Phillips, editor-in-chief of *College Avenue Magazine*

How do current trends in the magazine industry inform college magazines?

“For College Avenue, we have really put forth an effort in publishing regular online content starting this semester. In the past, we only put the content from the print product online so the website was pretty dormant. I noticed that a lot from traditional magazines such as Vogue or The New Yorker – they have a constant stream of online content to supplement the content in their print product. I also think design also plays an impact. A lot of magazines are going towards that streamlined, consistent design to make them look really modern. We have implemented that in our own magazine to give it a more modern look.”

What trends are you seeing in the success of student publications?

“Content wise, I would say content that really gets on the student level and talks about the things they are interested in like new, relevant restaurant opening, recreational activities and culture. Those types of stories are doing very well on social media. Also, anything on local institutions like performance venues or stores keep students interested. I really try to make my magazine visual, so I emphasize photography that is more art-based. The eye catching photography is what gets noticed by students.”

As Editor-in-Chief of *Ball Bearings Magazine*, Ball State’s student magazine, I have several of the same issues top magazines are facing play out. One of the challenges we have faced as students is creating longform content about substantial topics beyond just dining and fashion. We have done with by looking more toward national magazines. Starting in April, 2015, I met with other editors on staff to develop a plan to reach a more national goal. At the end of

2015, almost no one at Ball State University knew what *Ball Bearings* was. Our challenge was to create both a print and online presence that were merged and relevant to people outside of journalism students, and even outside of the Ball State community. Just like magazines across the country, we realized we faced a challenge. A false narrative suggested that readers want things short and simplified. We chose to tell compelling, researched, long-form stories. One of the ways we meshed online and print was by developing a content focus. Our fall magazine was all about the Millennial generation taking over as the largest generation, so online, we produced nine digital issues that went in-depth about different topics related to Millennials. These bi-weekly digital issues covered everything from technology to gender identity. We then continued this conversation on social media. By the time the print magazine was released, we had already generated an entire conversation about the topic.

Our spring print magazine focused on the cost of college. Not only did we create a conversation about the print magazine online, but we brought it to real life by hosting a live Q&A with the school's acting president and vice president of finance. This is something that many professional publications are implementing to bring written content to life.

Another thing that *Traditional Home* spoke about was their use of social media to promote content online. At *Ball Bearings* we have developed new social media strategies to promote our content. On Twitter, we create twitter lists of professionals we know are interested in our topics, and we tweet directly at them. This has led to over 5,000 views on just one of our stories. Social media is about investing in communities. For example, a story we posted about atheism was posted in Reddit and an atheist blog. There were hundreds of comments on the posts, and thousands of views on our website from every state and many countries.

Another major component of our magazine this year was a live event. Many professional magazines are bringing their editorial content to life by hosting events in the community to get people thinking and talking in person. As a part of our spring issue about the cost of college, I hosted a live Q&A event with Interim President Terry King and Vice President of Business Affairs Bernie Hannon. The event generated a conversation even before it began with our social media campaign. We asked students to submit questions using the hashtag #MyMoneyBSU. This actively engaged students who might have otherwise been disengaged with *Ball Bearings*.

By modeling our student magazine off of professional publications, we are seeing a greater reach and much more positive results in name-recognition of our magazine:

Platform	Reach
Online	Around 2,800 readers a month
Print Magazine	2,000+ people per issue
Twitter and Instagram Followers	411 Instagram; 1,640 Twitter; 973 Facebook
Videos	Up to 4,260 views per video
Event	100+ people + video

Based on the input of professional magazines and the success of my own student magazine, there is a future for magazines and long-form writing. While many print magazines have had to adapt to the digital world, there is still a desire for long-form magazine writing, even if it is taking on different forms. Based on the answers of a regional, national, and student magazine, I am better able to understand my success as a college journalist and editor-in-chief of a student magazine.

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